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KEVORK DJANSEZIAN, AP

Puff Daddy, also known as Sean (Puffy) Combs, performs during The Source Hip-Hop Awards show in Hollywood.

A hip-hop adventure

Treating aversion with immersion, jazzbo Juan Rodriguez takes a hip-hop trip. Along with menace and mucho money, he finds links with beloved bebop and an endearing, energizing, crude honesty

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

I'll admit it: I'm an old jazzbo. Therefore, I hate hip-hop music.

Like many of my g-g-generation (early baby boom), I get hot as heck when a hip-hopper and his car stereo's apocalyptic booming bass and belligerent brags roils up near my window while I'm trying to take a nap. And I'm more than a little put off by the stereotypically menacing rap fans in their hoods and baggy gear hiding who knows what.

So I've ignored hip-hop as long as possible, even though it's everywhere (in fashion, advertising, language, ad nauseam). My meltdown began at this summer's jazz festival, when DJ Carl Craig's Innerzone was invited to play the gala outdoor concert. Well, true jazzers like me were outraged by this, ugh, thing called techno-rap-hip-hop-jazz. The spectre of DJ Craig hung around like a bad smell. He brazenly invoked hype previously reserved for beloved bebop pioneers: "This is evolutionary music. This is art. I'm fighting to save everything to do with experimentation in music."

Balderdash! Sacrilege!

Recalling the battles 50 years ago between beboppers and "mouldy-figs," I perused Craig's wad of press material. He plays the role of unappreciated genius to the hilt: "Imagine the reactions as disc jockeys put the needle to the wax for the first time: surprise, confusion, rapture, and possibly even repugnance (as all ground-breaking records are bound to offend the unprepared)."

Luckily, jazzbos could breathe a sigh of relief. By most accounts, his concert was a bust. Canada's leading jazz critic Mark Miller, in a review greeting that the turntable was here to stay, summed up events: "It would be too strong to call it a hoax, so let's just call it a bill of goods ... Craig's vision is hardly compelling. In fact it's quite retro: a little of Sun Ra and Pink Floyd, a little more of Herbie Hancock's Headhunters, a lot of a rapper who exhorted Montreal to 'make some noise!' far too often ... (The) spectacle was hollow – at best pretentious, at worst juvenile."

So there!

Yet Craig's pre-concert advice – "If people are into opening their minds a little then I'm sure they'll have a great time" – stuck with me. Somehow, I was intrigued. I decided to launch a little investigation for myself (and, as it turned out, of myself).

ALLEN MCINNIS, GAZETTE

DJ Carl Craig and Innerzone at Jazz fest.

I checked out The Source, "The Magazine of Hip-Hop Music, Culture & Politics" that began as a fanzine and is now a thick glossy, and the more mainstream Vibe, started by Quincy Jones seven years ago, and the Thursday columns of *The Gazette*'s own hip-hop pipeline T'Cha Dunlevy. I gloomed sounds at record store listening booths, making purchases for further examination, then returning and exchanging them for more. I spent a night bird-dogging clichs.

In my modest immersion in hip-hop, I must confess that I saw a world of aliens in weird garb, emitting robotic raps and rhythms, and foul language to boot. I marvelled over the arcane names of hip-hop acts (from Ol' Dirty Bastard to Skinny Pimp, the Wheeldas to Sauce Money), and their slang (ehhllin' and illin' and so forth), and the simple fact that I was marveling meant that I was condescending. Worse, slumming. And that's not hep, daddy-o.

I was struck by the fact that 70 per cent of hip-hop purchases are made by white flaming youth (as, ahem, I once was). As Snoop Doggy Dogg heartwarmingly noted in 1993: "Little white kids come up to me, and it makes me feel damn good."

So hip-hop is tremendously exotic to this middle-age crazy, in a way that the teen subculture is. Did I say "sub"? No! In our stateof-the-art fin-de-siècle "niche" capitalism, subcultures rule, dude! "The democratization of status constitutes the Revenge of the Bypassed," sociologist Alan Wolfe wrote in the New York Times this year. "Kids from the inner city who lacked the educational credentials so valued by our society not only entertain us with their athletic or musical ability but also become taste-makers for the society as a whole."

While it has spread to the suburbs, hip-hop remains the soundtrack of what is euphemistically dubbed the urban jungle. Remember, early critics rapped bop as "jungle music" before it became the lingua franca of jazz, now sanitized as "America's classical music." Hip-hoppers, like beboppers before them, are cool, with an implacable gaze. Rap's lexicon is as code-like and "incomprehensible" (to squares) as bebop's was.

Like hip-hop, the bebop camp was perceived as undermining conventional manners and mores, with its jive language, berets & goatees & shades and, above all, its radical high-tempo reworkings of genteel standards like Gershwin's I Got Rhythm. In 1946, Time magazine decried such bop crossover hits as Who Put the Benzedrine in Mrs. Murphy's Ovaltine: "What bebop amounts to: hot jazz overheated, with overdone lyrics full of tweediness, references to narcotics and doubletalk." In other words, a menace to civilized society.

Rap comes right out and advertises itself as a menace to society. Rappers are hyped and celebrated as cool gangsters. Rolling Stone, that avatar of mass-cult hipness, raved that Wu-Tang Clan "create an air of wildness that promised violence to anyone who challenged them and to some who didn't," and that Notorious B.I.G. offers "frightening threats and narratives so sharp that you could tell the temperature in the room where the bullets were flying."

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MORDECAI RICHLER

Trading statecraft for stagecraft

Politicians as showbiz crossovers

These bewildering days actors run for political office and politicians act on TV. Politics and showbiz have become so entwined that it has become just short of impossible to distinguish one branch of entertainment from the other. Or, in at least one case, reality from what has been experienced only on a silver screen.

Consider, for instance, Ronald Reagan, the failed film star who settled for becoming an adored president. Again and again, eyes watering, Reagan famously told the moving story of a fatally stricken U.S. air force World War II bomber. As the crew bailed out, left behind in the inferno were the pilot and his wounded bombardier. The pilot had a parachute, but not the bombardier. "Son," said the pilot, according to Reagan, "I will not let you make this last trip alone," and he went down with his bombardier.

One day a cynical reporter asked, "Mr. President, if both the pilot and the bombardier died in the crash, how do you know this actually happened?"

Easy: Reagan knew because he had seen the movie. The president also claimed more than once that he had entered Buchenwald with the liberating troops. However, Reagan had never been to Europe during World War II. He had suffered the conflict on the home front, even as Clinton, Quayle and George W. Bush had managed to avoid service in Vietnam. What Reagan had seen was a documentary of troops liberating the concentration camps.

BEATTY, LIKE BULWORTH

Reagan was not the first Hollywood star to win political office. He was preceded by hoofer George Murphy, who became a senator for California, and could be followed by Warren Beatty. Beatty confusing his screen role of Bulworth with reality, is now said to be pondering a run for president.

Happily, in a more jubilated Canada, so far no actor has run for office, although Christopher Plummer would certainly have made a dashing prime minister, and any member of the Air Force bunch would have lent intellectual substance to the cabinet. We have had hockey players in Parliament and recently Adrienne Clarkson, best known as a TV performer, has become our new G-G, promising that every nosh in Government House will be organically grown, but so far not pronouncing on whether or not smoking will be tolerated.

Since then there has been a major crossover from politics to showbiz. Our incomparable Heritage Minister, Sheila Copps, has made her acting debut in this season's premiere of Power Play, a made-in-Canada TV series. Having suffered an ignominious defeat in reality – on Bill C-55, which would have penalized U.S. split-run magazine editions in Canada – she has triumphed on the small screen, saving a Hamilton hockey team from rapacious Americans foolish enough to offer $70 million for the club. Producers should note that were Ms. Copps to extend her acting career to the stage, she would start out with a built-in advantage. She would not have to wear a body mike. Her voice, unaided, would easily carry to the last row of the second balcony.

Following Ms. Copps's stunning debut, it has been rumoured that savvy showbiz lawyer Michael Levine has been busy on his cell phone. There is talk that Joan Christen has been asked to play the lead in a planned sequel to Forrest Gump. However, this offer is conditional on Bill Clinton not being hired to write the screenplay, inadvertently rendering the Gump character far too intelligent. The problem is Clinton, speaking off the cuff at a conference on federalism, in Mont-Tremblant, was more articulate on the benefits of that institution, in a couple of succinct paragraphs, than Chrétien has managed in years of chatter on the subject.

THE DESPERATE ALTERNATIVE

Pundits, commenting on a recent speech by Preston Manning, have adjudged him the most intellectually gifted member of the monkey house, which is all you need to know about Ottawa. However, as Manning's Desperate Alternative scheme continues to falter, I understand that he has sent Michael Levine a list of his TV comedy credits, along with a number of stunning photographs of himself in Western attire: 10-gallon hat, string tie, high-heeled cowboy boots. But it's a hard sell. In the good old days when they still made real Westerns, Manning would have been a natural for the adorable, squeaky-voiced stagecoach rider, a shotgun riding his knee, who would have served as John Wayne's best pal. As the wagons gathered in a circle at nightfall, he could have spoken those immortal lines to Wayne: "Shucks, Duke, but ain't it kinda quiet tonight?"

"Too quiet," Wayne would have assuredly responded, even as a redskin arrow, shooting out of the dark, caught Preston in the neck.

Joe Clark is another difficult case, now that they no longer make those Blondie films. Clark would have excelled playing Dagwood. Why, in my mind's eye, I can see Clark as Blondie tells him, "I've got news for you. The stork is going to pay us a visit." And Joe, in character, faints with surprise.

Gilles Duceppe, who made his slapstick debut wearing that famous shower cap, would be silly as the high-school principal in any number of those screwball comedies now being churned out for retarded teenagers. On the other hand, he might turn down such a role on the grounds that it was yet another humiliation for a Québécois.

JOE SCHWARCZ C5 ◆ DAVE BARRY C5 ◆ ANGLOMAN C6 ◆ SOAPS C9 ◆ XPRESS C10

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